Attending the “Best” High School May Yield Benefits and Risks for Students

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Parents often go to great lengths to ensure that their children attend top schools, surrounded by high-achieving peers who often come from advantaged backgrounds. But data collected from individuals over a span of 50 years suggests that these aspects of selective schools aren’t uniformly beneficial to students’ educational and professional outcomes in the following decades.

The findings are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

“Above and beyond students’ individual capabilities and their family background, more selective schools provided both benefits and risks to students, which translated into real-world differences in their careers years later,” says lead researcher Richard Göllner of the University of Tübingen. “Specifically, being in a high school with a higher average socioeconomic background benefited students later on, whereas being in a school with a higher average achievement level harmed students later on.”

Göllner and colleagues were interested in understanding how the composition of a school can influence student outcomes, especially given that previous research seemed to yield mixed results. Researchers who examined the average socioeconomic status of a student body found that higher socioeconomic status tended to be associated with better student outcomes. Those that examined average academic achievement, on the other hand, found that higher achievement was often associated with worse

outcomes.

“In light of these two contradictory lines of research, it is difficult to answer the question that often lies at the root of families’ decisions to move into areas with the ‘best’ schools,” the researchers note.

They decided to examine the two school characteristics – socioeconomic status and achievement – together in one study to determine the unique contribution that each aspect makes to students’ short- and long-term outcomes.

The researchers examined data from Project TALENT, a nationally representative, longitudinal study that followed American high school students over five decades. In that time, the participants completed a variety of measures that assessed their academic competencies, family background, and life outcomes.

Göllner and colleagues specifically analyzed data from 377,015 participants from 1,226 high schools, examining their performance on standardized achievement tests, their socioeconomic background, and their educational expectations. For available participants, they also examined participants’ actual educational attainment, their income, and their professional standing 11 years and 50 years after the initial assessment.

Above and beyond the influence of individual characteristics and family background, students who attended socioeconomically advantaged high schools tended to complete more years of schooling, earn higher annual incomes, and work in jobs with greater occupational prestige compared with peers who attended less advantaged schools.

Taking these associations into account, the researchers found that students who attended high-achievement schools tended to have lower educational attainment, income, and occupational prestige 11 and 50 years later.

These divergent associations may be explained, at least in part, by the students’ own educational expectations: Those who attended advantaged schools tended to have relatively high expectations whereas those who attended high-achievement schools tended to have relatively lower expectations.

“The permanent comparison with high achieving peers seemed to harm students’ beliefs in their own abilities and that was associated with serious consequences for their later careers,” Göllner explains.

In reality, advantaged schools tend to also be high-achievement schools, which would result in so-called “lost gains,” whereby the advantages of high socioeconomic status are countered by the disadvantages of high achievement.

In future research, Göllner and colleagues hope to identify teacher-related factors that might buffer against the harmful effects of social comparison.

“We want to figure out what teachers can do to make sure that students’ positive beliefs in their own academic capabilities are not harmed by being surrounded by high-achieving peers,” says Göllner.

Coauthors on the research include Rodica Ioana Damian of the University of Houston, Benjamin

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